Seminar Papers: 4

# THE QUR'ĀNIC CONCEPT OF HISTORY

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The Islamic Foundation

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# FOREWORD

The Islamic Foundation has been running its fortnightly seminar programmes for several years. The seminar is addressed by scholars and researchers both from the Foundation itself and from outside. In the past, a number of visiting professors and Muslim scholars from abroad have presented papers on a variety of topics. Some of these papers are of high academic standard and deserve wider circulation to researchers and scholars interested in the field. The Foundation now proposes to arrange its seminar programmes on a thematic basis.

An attempt is being made to publish some of the important papers in mimeograph form. We hope to publish a series of such papers based on the seminar programme, thoroughly revised and edited, the authors having taken into consideration the observations, suggestions and comments made by the participants in the seminar.

I have great pleasure in introducing the fourth paper in the series written by Professor Syed Ali Ashraf. Professor Ashraf has a very distinguished academic career; for a number of years he served as a professor and head of the department of English in the Universities of Karachi and Makka. At present he is Secretary General of the Follow-up Committee, First World Conference on Muslim Education and is acting as General Editor for publications in the Islamic Education series. Professor Ashraf in this brief paper has very ably presented the various concepts of history and has shown how the Qur'ān tackles this issue - a topic on which some other authors have also written in the past. The merit of Professor Ashraf's paper lies in its brevity and precision. I hope that readers will find it very interesting and useful.

November 20th 1979.
1st Muharram, 1400 Hijra

M.M. Ahsan
Chairman, Seminar Programme
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bismillahirrahmanirrahim

# THE QUR'ĀNIC CONCEPT OF HISTORY

by

Dr. Syed Ali Ashraf

## Definition

Any narration of the past is known as 'history'. It is used as a generic term when one talks of 'the history of civilizations', 'the political history of a country', 'the economic history of any region', 'the history of religions' or 'the history of mankind'. But when one frames the history syllabus for school children or teaches 'history' as a subject in schools and colleges, one generally deals with the political history of races, nations, peoples and mankind. Whether we are teaching the history of the world or the history of a nation or the history of a region, we describe the rise and fall of nations, or the growth and expansion of political progress or downfall of houses and families. Even when we speak of civilisations and cultures, we consider them in the context of peace and war among groups of people or nations or races. In other words, racial, cultural, social, economic and moral history of mankind is always presented within the context of the growth, expansion and fall of political authority. When the past of mankind is presented in the Qur'ān, the same rise and fall of political authority is discussed. The narration of the past of mankind through history in the restricted sense of the word is therefore, both in the Qur'an and in modern connotation, the narration of the rise and fall of political authority.

## The Past

What is this past? How far back do we go when we draw up a syllabus? What particular nations or races or groups of people do we feel confident enough to talk about? What is it that gives us this confidence? Here we try to be what is generally known as 'scientific' as if only by scientific methods can we reach the truth about the past. We do not accept any version of the past of mankind which cannot be proved with documents and material evidence. Divine re-

velations that came to prophets are always ignored because of several reasons. Some people believe revelations to be true and some don't. It becomes a matter of faith and not a matter which can be proved demonstratively to have happened. Moreover, even if we accept the revelations to be true, can we accept all that is claimed to have been revealed to be genuine? The Qur'ān challenges many of what the Jews claimed to be true about some prophets to have been fabrications by later generations.[1]

The truth or falsehood of what was claimed to have been revelations could only be verified by later revelations. This was done by the revelations that came to the Prophet of Islam, peace and blessings of Allah be on him. From the purely modern scientific point of view the Prophet's life and activities have been analysed and verified. Therefore from the modern historical point of view, revelations stored up in the form of the Qur'ān are to be regarded as something genuine. Whether they came from Allah or not depends on a person's faith in Islam. We cannot compel a non-Muslim to accept revelations to be true. Our methods of determining the scope of history with the help of revelations cannot therefore be regarded as a universally acceptable method.

Some scholars get very worried because of the restricted recognition of the validity of the revelations. They feel that the so-called 'scientific' method is the only valid method because this method confines our attention to something solid and never asks us to travel in the unknown.[2] But this method by its very nature is highly materialistic in character. Just because some people do not have faith and cannot believe in revelations, just because some people are atheists should we ignore our past as revealed to us by Allah Himself? As we are Muslims, revelations should be regarded as a valid means of knowing the past of mankind. It is true that by doing so we are dragging in faith as a means of constructing the history of Man. Why we should not do so I do not understand unless it is our weakness in our faith. Those who

1. God said this especially about the Jews. There are many verses in the Qur'ān such as Sura 2: 40-42. See also Sura 2:79: "cursed be those who write books themselves and later on say that they have come from God".
2. Scientific historians emerged first in Germany. In England this tendency became popular in the late 19th century.

do not believe in the existence of God or who cannot accept the concept of a Divine plan in history need not be convinced, nor need we worry about them. The Prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, proved beyond all doubt the validity of all truths about human life revealed to him through the Word of Allah which we find enshrined in the Qur'ān. We must therefore accept the past of mankind revealed to us by Allah and thus we should go back to revelations in order to reconstruct the history of Man on this earth.

## Range and Scope

The range and scope of this past embrace the whole of mankind from Man's first advent on the earth till doomsday. The future of mankind is not the primary concern of history. That aspect of human life falls within the scope only of religion. But the past of mankind narrated in the Qur'ān and further explained in the sayings of the Prophet should be considered as portions of human history.

This range has certain characteristics which are at variance with the history that man's limited investigations into his own past have revealed. Instead of accepting religious statements modern historians have borrowed from biology the concept of evolution, from anthropology the concept of races, from sociology the concept of social change and hence the evolution of civilisations and cultures and from archaeology the cultural patterns of Man in different ages.[3] As they know that new investigations may bring to light new facts which may compel them to alter or modify their previous conjectures and conclusions, historians consider their early findings about early Man about whom there is no written record as not final. They do not

3. The impact of these forces can be seen even in the Study of History by Toynbee in spite of the fact that he focussed attention on eternal values manifested in history.

consider God's statements as valid because they have nothing tangible to prove or disprove them. In other words, their complete denial of the past as presented in the Qur'ān is nothing less than sheer arrogance and a proof of their lack of faith. But they want to avoid such discussion because they try to assert that they are ready to talk of Man's past from what they could find and verify or analyse. In other words, the knowledge that Allah has given to Man through His Prophet is not regarded as acceptable knowledge. As a result there is hardly any similarity between the two images of the past of mankind. As both of them are covering the same ground and presenting the image of Man from his earliest days till today, the variations and conflicts become glaring and the philosophical bases of the two need investigation. A glance at the two images would focus our attention on the basic areas of similarity and difference.

## The Two Images

### The Qur'ānic Image

If we leave the pre-earthly image as something beyond the scope of the history of Man on this earth, we get the image of the first man and his wife, Adam and Eve, and his children. Adam is a completely new creation endowed with spiritual knowledge and blessed with the duty of a Prophet for his children. We do not get any details about his life. We are informed of his two sons, Abel and Cain. The next picture is of human corruption and the destruction of all unbelievers by a great flood at the time of another Prophet, Noah.

From the Qur'ān it appears that there was a time when all people were of the same colour. But Allah divided them into different groups having different colours because he wanted that they should know each other and through that knowledge understand the purpose of creation and the glory of Allah.

From Noah till the last Prophet there is a continuous line of Prophethood and human history, with the rise and

fall of nations integrally related to faith and Man's behaviour, his acceptance or denial of the Message that Allah had sent through His prophets. Political authority is shown to have been linked up with the moral and spiritual conduct of Man. The life of the last Prophet, peace be upon him, proves beyond all doubt that all authority ultimately belongs to Allah. He chooses those who obey Him and fight for His cause. When a nation disobeys Allah and upsets the code of life granted by Him then Allah sends warnings to that nation in the form of natural calamities. But if the nation does not repent and becomes more hard-hearted then He sends human beings to destroy those people. He also sows the seeds of discord among those nations which give up His code and proudly and arrogantly pose to be self-sufficient.

There is thus a Divine plan in history. Increase in wealth or a higher standard of living does not mean real happiness. Real happiness consists in pure living, in humility, in resignation to the Will of Allah, and in fighting in His path in order to establish His kingdom on the earth. Any nation that becomes morally degenerated is bound to fall and lose its greatness.

### The Modern Image

A modern historian would present the first human being or the first group of human beings as having emerged through a biological process, how we do not know. Instead of being a Man endowed with knowledge and of his being a Prophet, the first man, so the historian conjectures, must have been 'a primitive' creature, intellectually stunted, and culturally blind. Psychologists and social anthropologists like Jung and others have drawn inferences from their limited observations and formulated this theory about the 'primitive Man' and his consciousness. It has now become a fashionable concept.

Once they accept the theory of 'primitive' consciousness, it is logical and legitimate for these scholars to formulate a theory about the growth of 'modern' consciousness. This theory has been successfully propounded and used. It is

now common knowledge' that as Man goes on discovering new things in and about the universe and about their physical selves and as he goes on inventing ever-newer instruments of civilisation, his life becomes more and more 'complex', his mind grows and develops and his values change and go on changing. From a study only of the external changes and changes in the instruments of civilisation, these scholars have concluded about inner change in Man and change in his consciousness about values. They have also denuded values of their absolute framework and made them entirely relative. They forget that neither has Man become a more improved creature biologically, or been able to become a superman mentally or intellectually or from the point of view of those aspects of human personality which are essential for living, love and charity. They cannot deny the fact that there has been no change in man's response to love, kindness, mercy, charity, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, justice, honesty, truthfulness. Man's reaction to injustice, ruthlessness, lies and bribery remains the same. Similarly a man has not become more aware and more truthful or a more just person because he can travel by a jet plane today. The complexity is of situations and not of values.

According to the Qur'ānic concept of Man, therefore, the evolution of civilisations does not indicate a growth from primitivity to modernity in so far as values are concerned. On the other hand, the Qur'ān divides Man's existence on this earth into three sections. The first section is comprised of the period that extends from Adam to Muhammad, peace be on them, that is, from the first prophet to the last prophet of Islam. The second section extends from the period of the *Khulafā'-Rāshidūn* till the regeneration of Man after the Second coming of Jesus, peace be on him. The third section shows man's gradual downfall till he loses all consciousness of values and the whole human race and the creation are destroyed by God.

The history of Man presented in the first section is shown to have been governed by a cyclic process. Man is constantly invaded by material prosperity and moral depravity. Some races were therefore destroyed by God and

some are shown to have been regenerated by prophets.[4] The history of the Israelites shows this pattern very clearly. They went astray several times and received penalty from God through defeats and captivation. Again some new Prophets led them to victory and spiritual regeneration and worldly glory. Thus the rise and fall of nations and races are shown to be integrally related to their obedience or disobedience to the code of life given to them by God. That is why God repeatedly asks us to go round the earth and see what had happened to past generations and learn a lesson.[5]

But the lesson that a modern archaeologist and a historian learn from such a tour or from all excavations and analysis is very different from the lesson that Allah wants us to learn. They analyse the past, reconstruct it as far as it is possible for them to do so but they never try to see or find any divine purpose in the rise and fall of nations. They try to investigate the cause of the fall of such nations or the rise of other nations within the orbit of purely worldly and matter-of-fact existence. God and His laws do not seem to play any role in human existence. Man's own machinations, his opportunities and experiments, his endeavours and superiority or inferiority, in strategy or tactics or diplomacy seem to be the only causes of his victory or downfall.

The Qur'ān teaches us a completely different lesson. The cause of the suffering that the Muslims incurred at the battle of Uhud has been stated to be their greed and a false sense of arrogance and superiority and a consequent disobedience to the order of the Prophet, peace be on him.[6] Similarly the victory of Tālūt against Jālūt and the Philistines did not depend on number of weapons or better

4. All authority belongs to Allah alone. (Qur'ān, 3: 21-30)
5. 'Already before your time have precedents been made. Traverse the earth then, and see what has been the end of those who falsify the signs of God'. Qur'ān 3: 136.
6. Qur'ān 3 : 149-171. About God's special help in the battle of Badr see Qur'ān 8 : 1-30.

strategy.[7] It depended on sheer faith in God and complete dependence on His help and guidance. Similarly suffering came to the Israelites and they had to wonder in deserts and hills for forty years just because they did not believe that they could win victory against the Canaanites. They disobeyed Moses, peace be on him, and ignored his entreaties.[8] Otherwise they would have won because this was the promised land for them. Thus it was their cowardice, and purely materialistic analysis of the situation in which they found themselves weak in number, physical strength and military strategy that prevented them from following the instructions of Moses, peace be on him. Not that military strategy should be ignored. But the ultimate victory does not depend on strategy alone. It depends on Man's faith and sincerity. The world is presented in the Qur'ān as a moral world in which Allah wants the values to be upheld. He helps that nation which upholds those values.

When we therefore study the past, we invariably find this principle governing the life of Man. The destruction of 'Ād and Thamūd has been presented in the Qur'ān.[9] If we apply this principle to the contemporary world we shall see that this principle is intensely operative. If we take the two world wars, we are compelled to admit that victory was granted by God to the side which was morally superior. But corruption, loss of basic values and the giving up of religious principles are now ruining their lives. Their society is facing complete disruption. Their sense of security that a peaceful home-life used to give them, their respect for the individual and the family-life - all these are almost gone. Prostitution, even incest have been legalised. Though they have a lot of wealth, they do not have any peace of mind. An extremely vicious circle of inflation, price-rises and

7. Ibid 2 : 248-250

8. Ibid 5 : 20-26

9. Ibid 7 : 65-84

wage-increases is squeezing the last ounce of happiness from social life. Allah has clearly indicated in the Qur'an that He has fixed a time-limit for these nations. He allows them to follow their lusts till a saturation point is reached. He then showers destruction on such people. England ruled half the world because of all the rising races in the nineteenth century this race was the most honest and just. The English middle-class was upholding the values of chastity, truth honesty, charity and justice more than any other nation or country. That was why those who established their empire were impeached in their parliament. Now that the same nation has become spiritually apologetic and morally degenerate in sex, they are ruining their basic fibre of honesty, breaking their secure home-life and have already started suffering the consequences of insecurity and goallessness. This race has lost its undisputed leadership. In spite of this, it still upholds certain basic values which religion preaches such as non-racialism, independence and justice. But sexual degeneration leads to a sense of irresponsibility which automatically leads to extreme selfishness and hence to a loss of charity, righteousness and love for others. These forces of evil are eating the roots of this nation. That is why Nazism has already lured away a group of young men and women who are trying to destroy all those values which this society used to uphold. The formation of such a Front indicates the victory of narrow racialism, and all the future dread of injustice and corruption that follow such a victory. Twenty years ago it would have been impossible to form such a Front and parade its presence in public. That they can now do so indicates their victory and hence the weakening of the fibre of justice. I only hope that this victory does not gain more adherents. The protests against this group indicate that the fibre of this nation is not completely ruined. But it is difficult for us to ascertain how far the upholding of some values would be able to counterbalance the destruction of other values. Allah has repeatedly said that wealth does not indicate real peace and prosperity. It is given sometimes as a trial, sometimes to create further trouble. Some European countries have a lot of wealth but their society

has become tolerant of unfaith and sexual corruption of the worst sort. The very fabric of humanity is at stake. Many western scholars have started lamenting this fate and are unable to give a viable solution. The only solution is a return to Faith and a reassertion of the code of life granted by Allah. But as none of the European nations including Soviet Russia is at all interested in those principles, it seems that Allah has sown in them the seed of discord and would allow this conflict to flourish till they destroy themselves or return to the fold of Islam and become regenerated.

## The Metaphysics

We have so far discussed the past as envisaged in the Qur'an. God has created Man in order to see him realise his true greatness through the principle of worship. And the basic principle of worship is ingrained in the code of life granted to Man by God. So long as Man maintains, preserves and upholds this code, God promises to grant him victory, glory and greatness. In the political field it means the granting of political authority. Only by getting that authority can Man make that code prevail in the society. If Man does not support that principle, God will allow Man some respite but a time will invariably come when he will be totally destroyed.

The second principle operative in human history is the continuous renewal of values through the emergence of Prophets and, after the last Prophet, through the emergence of Reformers who would remind Man of his essential greatness and how he can achieve that. If a society wants to continue to live and avoid the wrath of God, if it wants to survive in spite of temptations in the form of corruptions, vices and all forms of evil, it must from time to time reassert Absolute values. History of nations becomes the history of continuous regenerations and continuous conflict between good and evil.

The third principle that the Qur'anic view of history asserts is the difference that exists between material progress and moral standards. Morality is based on Absolute

values. They are immutable. Social change therefore does not affect values. It only forces people to lay more emphasis on certain values and less emphasis on others because circumstances demand such treatment. From the point of view of history therefore social changes lead to occasional shifting of emphasis and not to a rejection of values or a reinterpretation of them.

The Qur'ānic concept of History therefore differs fundamentally from the Marxist concept and the Christian concept and to a large extent from the Judaic concept. The Marxist concept is based on a purely materialistic view of the universe. There seems to be a mysteriously holy purpose, a natural urge towards the establishment of a universal order where there is no exploitation, and no division of mankind into rich and poor or high and low. Marx tries to prove that such a dream-world will come through because of the basic economic process of life. He then analyses the past and tries to show how all values including religion and religious values are entirely dependent on the process of economic evolution. It is an inevitable economic process of history. As the Islamic concept is based on a completely different concept of man and values there is no point in comparing these two concepts or in trying to demolish the unsound foundation of this thesis. In trying to do so we would be involved in the discussion of Marxist philosophy from the point of view of Islam. As the fundamentals of these two approaches are completely different all that can be done now is to point out this difference which we have already done.

As regards the Jewish concept of history, the basic concept which governs it is that the Jews are the chosen people and authority should ultimately belong to them. Just as they denied Jesus, they denied Muhammad, peace be on them. Their interpretation of the past takes into account the concept of values, the concept of a Divine purpose in history but somehow they want to limit the power of Divinity by falsifying the predictions of their own prophets who had told them of the coming of the Prophet of Islam. They hope that one day God will again give complete authority, to His chosen race. They have so far failed to reply to the

challenge of the Qur'ān that Allah is sending suffering to them because of their transgressions in the past and transgressions even now.

The Christian concept is very different. History is seen as a long process making the stage ready for God to become Man so that Man may be redeemed. All historical events of the past therefore were events leading to the emergence of Christ. His crucifixion is the central event in human history. Human history is divided by them into two sections - events leading to the crucifixion and from crucifixion till Doomsday. Here again, the theological concept is fundamentally different. The moral order is the same as that of the Muslims, the principle of the relationship between the good life and the restoration of authority to a financially crippled group is not the same.

The Qur'ānic concept therefore differs basically from the Jewish and the Christian concepts in spite of their similar moral framework. It does not oppose scientific investigations. It only wants the scientific findings and theories to be verified in the light of Islam.

Dr. Syed Ali Ashraf was born in Bangladesh. He served the Universities of Karachi and Makka as Professor and head of the Department of English for a number of years. At present he is Secretary General of the follow-up Committee, First World Conference on Muslim Education and is acting as General Editor for publications in the Islamic Education series.

THE ISLAMIC FOUNDATION is an educational and research organisation devoted to developing a better understanding of Islam among all the people of the world, Muslim and non-Muslim. It aims at improving human communications so as to galvanise man to the message and ideal of One God and the unity of mankind, as brought by all the Prophets of God throughout the ages, last of whom was the Prophet Muhammad (blessings of Allah and peace be upon him). An important aspect of the Foundation's multifarious activities is the publication of literature about Islam.